



Jean Norry's story of

Dorothy



Dorothy Merritt was born on the 16th of May, 1904 in a suburb of Southampton, in Hampshire, England. Her birth record in the English web site, Free BMD, and RBS Worldpay provides the information that her birth was at South Stonegate, Hampshire. This may have been a little village in 1904 that is now a part of Southampton. She was named after one of her father's old girlfriends in Market Lavington, Wiltshire.

At the time of her birth her father Bob Merritt had a job on the railway that sent a train up through the New Forest and the Salisbury Plains to Market Lavington every day. This Merritt family had lived in Market Lavington for four or five generations and the men of the family had several prosperous blacksmith shops in that town before the advent of train service. The blacksmiths were in trouble around 1880.

Bob and Ada came to Canada shortly after Dorothy's birth in the summer of 1904 on the ship the Lake Champlain. They landed at Quebec. Bob was with a group of Salvation Army men coming to Canada for an emigration project conducted by the church. Two of these friends, Harry Giddings and Fred Riches, were Salvation Army Captains who settled in the course of time, in Winnipeg and Toronto. Bob and Ada had a small trunk of belongings. Uncle Percy sat on it during the voyage and my sister has kept this trunk as a souvenir. They took the train west and I still can't figure out why but they got off at Napanee, a small town on the eastern end of Lake Ontario.

Bob and Ada never went back to England. They were killed tragically at Mooney's Crossing, near Napanee on Oct. 31st in 1943. Bob had prospered beyond any reasonable expectations of what his situation was in Canada, and no doubt they could have paid for a trip to England in the 1940s, but nobody was making social visits to England at that time. The train that killed them that night in October was the second part of the regular Toronto to Montreal run, loaded with thousands of Canadian soldiers on their way to England.

Back in 1904 when they arrived in Canada, Bob had gone to the Post Office in Napanee to find a job and he looked on their bulletin board. He got a job as a hired man on a farm with a little house for his family with the Harrisons in Adolphustown. Years later, at the W.D. Roblin farm, he arranged to own a pure bred calf every year as part of his salary, and by the 1920s he had a small herd of his own. I think Reade Roblin and his father, W.D. Roblin, helped him. Eventually his Holstein cattle were registered as "Elmhurst" and his bull, the one my Grandma called "the animal", was in demand for breeding purposes.

Uncle Leslie was born at the Roblin farm in 1912. Dorothy and Percy had to walk about three miles to school, but of course, there were quite a few other children along that Bay of Quinte country road, all going to the same school house at Adolphustown. I never heard them complain about the three miles distance.

Bob was able to buy a farm at Sillsville in the 1920s. Uncle Percy drove the horses to Napanee with the milk to the dairy every day and Dorothy and Leslie went to high school. They had music lessons and choir practice and church meetings and fall fairs. In 1919 everyone in the family except Bob caught the flu and if he hadn't made soup and carried it from bed to bed while they were very sick, maybe they would have all died. I've heard this story several times and I'm not sure which house they were living in when that happened. Everybody had to wear glasses after they recovered.

Grandma Merritt taught Sunday School at the Sillsville United church. About 10 or 15 little 5 year olds would come there on Sunday to be in her Kindergarten class. In the 1930s I used to run ahead to the class room to arrange the little red chairs in a circle. Grandpa Bob would read the Star Weekly and wait to take us home. I found out years later that Dorothy had kept the attendance at that Sunday school for years.

Somebody in the family gave me a neat and tidy note book with the names of all those little people and the check marks to show their attendance.

Dorothy grew up in a hard working family, intent on becoming successfully established in Ontario. She worked outdoors with the cows and horses, the crops, the vegetable garden and the fruit trees. I think she liked it. She could drive a team of horses and milk cows and help get the hay into the barn. Her father managed to put together a Delco electrical system beside the barn to run his milking machine, long before anyone else had electricity. We had to turn off the lights in the house at 8 o'clock. Bob always had a new car.

Dorothy had beautiful handwriting and played the piano for the hymns at church. I think Dad fell in love with her for these two things, her handwriting and her music. He loved to have a sing-song around the piano. In 1928 she was teaching school at the S.S. # 2 School house in Adolphustown and boarding at the Smiths. Her parents, Bob and Ada were very pleased with her and also with Uncle Leslie. He had finished high school and worked for the Bank of Commerce. Uncle Percy was working with his father and courting Auntie Irene. I think 1928 was a pretty good year. Years later, in 1943, Uncle Leslie was getting married in Toronto and these three "old ladies" were all going goo-goo about that wedding. They had to buy little white lace gloves and new hats. I still have the gloves. I was 13 and too big to be the flower girl, even though I was Uncle Leslie's favourite niece. Grandpa Bob drove his new car to Toronto with Percy and Mom and Grandma and Auntie Irene.

Dorothy was so very good at writing nice letters for the Women's Institute. She was the secretary for years. She wrote the minutes of the Township of Adolphustown every month in Dad's big roll book. She was an absolute failure at making a good relationship with her mother in law, Annie. And she couldn't train Dad to be neat and tidy. He had a nervous breakdown in 1938 and had to "rest" for about two years. He thought the problem was with his heart, and he went to see Dr. Third, a heart specialist in Kingston. The cure was a huge bottle of black tonic water that Dad said was choke cherry juice and iron. I didn't question this formula. It must have worked. He got better but he was never quite the same. He was so concerned about his health that I decided I would never be a nurse.

I remember the day that Alf the hired man, who was a very neat and tidy man, came to ask for a raise. I think we paid him a dollar a day. Dad was in bed in his mother's dining room and Mom took Alf to talk to Dad and present his case. Dad turned him down and Alf went away and Dorothy had to do all the work. She had grown up on a farm where her father "got things done" and I think she thought it was important to do the same at our place. The meals and the housework and the laundry and the sewing were of less importance to her. Her mother in law made 10 or 12 loaves of bread every week in her big wood stove oven. These were beautiful crusty golden loaves. Our milk went to the cheese factory and we usually had lots of cheddar cheese on hand. We had whey butter from the factory. During the 1930's when so many people were having a hard time, we were poor, but managed quite well. Dad gave up driving his Model A Ford, the car he loved the most in his whole life, and put it up on chunks of wood in the drive house. And sometimes for supper when there was nothing else to eat in the house we had slices of bread with thick chunks of cheese melted into it in the hot oven.

I went picking raspberries with Mom at Heathcote's Berry Farm. She was their best berry picker. None of the other 15 or 20 pickers could keep up to Dorothy. I was a dismal failure. She took her pay home in berries. Dorothy made wonderful pies. However, I was her favourite person to make a cake for choir practice. Grandma Merritt taught me.

Many years later when she and Dad were in a very nice nursing home on Markham Rd. in Uxbridge, Dad thought their old age pension cheques should be mailed directly to the nursing home office on a monthly basis. This was suggested by Allan, their oldest grandson, who was a budding young bank executive and Dorothy didn't disagree. She was proud of Allan, but what she didn't foresee was that this would leave her flat broke. I think she was annoyed that she had worked so hard on that farm for so many years, milking cows, washing milk cans, stooking grain and loading hay and picking tomatoes, and now she didn't have anything to show for it in her bank account.

The farm was Dad's legacy. It had been in the Davis family for 200 years and he sold it off in sections. They were living in Picton when they finally sold the house. None of his four children could see themselves working to maintain the cattle, the crops, the chickens and the pigs as well as the upkeep of the old house. I think what Dorothy did, in working so hard and long outdoors, made it seem impossible for us in the next generation to ever keep up.

One of her greatest achievements was a trip to England in 1969 to visit her Merritt relatives in Market Lavington. She had saved all the old letters and the mailing addresses and she kept in touch. Dad made recordings of their visits. They had great fun telling us about this trip when they came home.

I was with her when she died in the Scarborough Grace Hospital. She had gone there to confer with a doctor about her diabetes and heart problems. He was such a nice kind little doctor. I can't remember his name. After he left we sat there in the sun (there must have been a skylight) chatting about things. She got up to get back into bed and I got up to leave. She had a heart attack right there on the side of the bed. I ran up and down the hallway trying to get a nurse to come. Eventually, all the nurses on duty ran into the room to see what they could do, but it was too late. She was gone.